

APOLLONIUS OF TYANA: A PARAPSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

Apollonius of Tyana (pronounced 'Tee'-uh-nuh') may be described as an itinerant philosopher and religious reformer of the first century A.D. But this description does not capture the aspect for which he is most famous: the claim has been made that he also possessed various *miraculous* powers, perhaps comparable to those ascribed to his contemporary, Jesus of Nazareth, and, more recently, to Sai Baba of Puttaparti (Haraldsson, 1987). In this paper I shall describe a number of ostensibly paranormal incidents which are reported to have occurred in the long career of Apollonius.² The extent to which these claims should be taken seriously is much debated. But at the very least it will become clear that *claims* of the paranormal have been with us since antiquity, particularly in regard to figures thought to be holy.

Our Sources of Information about Apollonius

There are a handful of scattered references in a number of authors,³ but our fullest account of Apollonius comes from a book called *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, written in Greek by one Philostratus the Athenian. Flavius Philostratus was born on the island of Lemnos c.170 A.D. and died c.245 A.D. He studied rhetoric, first at Athens and then in Rome. Sometime after his thirtieth birthday, he became a member of the literary circle of Empress Julia Domna, wife of Septimius Severus (who reigned from A.D. 193 to 211). The story goes that Julia Domna was given some memoirs written by one Damis of Nineveh, who had accompanied Apollonius on most of his travels, and that the Empress asked Philostratus to use these as a basis for writing a proper biography of the sage.

Philostratus also drew on other sources, most of which, like Damis's original Notebooks, are now lost to us. He used a history written by one Maximus of Aegae, a Roman administrator in Asia Minor. He also had access to a number of letters written by Apollonius, some of which had been owned by Emperor Hadrian. He read the sage's will, as well as several treatises written by him. There apparently existed four books by one Moeragenes, which the Athenian considered unreliable and therefore rejected. Finally, Philostratus had actually travelled to Tyana and other cities to collect anecdotes.

It seems that Apollonius did not establish any sort of society to perpetuate his philosophical and religious views. However, some very loose-knit school of Apollonian thought may have continued for some time. But whatever the moral qualities of its followers in the beginning, it seems to have acquired a bad reputation by the time of Philostratus, along with Apollonius himself. At

¹ I wish to thank Drs Alkibiades Oikonomides, John Beloff and Ian Stevenson for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

² Other writers who have examined Apollonius from a parapsychological viewpoint are Burt (1967) and Knight (1961; 1970).

³ See Mead (1980), Section IV.

any rate, Philostratus states that his aim was to rehabilitate the reputation of Apollonius, and defend him against the charge of having been a charlatan or practitioner of black magic. Philostratus wanted to show that these accusations had no basis in fact, and that Apollonius was a divinely-inspired sage and prophet who wished to reform religion along Pythagorean lines.

Indeed, there are passages in Philostratus where Apollonius is described as being divine, because of his unusual gifts. (Doubtless this term was used because the ancients lacked the modern category, 'paranormal', and had to choose between 'natural' and 'supernatural'.) We can read in *The Augustan History*⁴ that Emperor Alexander Severus (who reigned from 222 to 235 A.D.), "instead of setting up images of the gods in his private shrine, established therein, as objects of his veneration, statues of Alexander the Great, Orpheus, Apollonius of Tyana, Abraham, and Christ" (Conybeare, 1969, p.xiii). Later on, towards the end of the third century, one Hierocles, Governor of Bithynia, wrote an anti-Christian book asserting that Apollonius was every bit as great and divine as Jesus. This drew a spirited rejoinder from the Christian historian Eusebius of Caesarea (who attributes most of Apollonius's powers to fiction and the remainder to the Devil!). But Eusebius makes the important point that, prior to Hierocles, no anti-Christian writer had thought of proposing Apollonius as a rival and equal to Jesus.⁵ This is important because, much closer to our own time, there arose a school of thought that suggested that Philostratus had written the *Life* as a piece of anti-Christian propaganda. Most commentators today (e.g. Shepard, 1966, p.x) discount this view.

I cannot, however, disprove the charge made by some commentators (e.g. Jowett, 1880; Oldmeadow, 1968, p.19) that Philostratus had read the Gospels and used some of the incidents there related of Jesus as a basis for fictitious attributions to the man of Tyana. One Apollonian incident in particular — which will be quoted in detail later — shows a striking resemblance to one of the most important Christian miracles, namely the appearance of Christ to his apostles after his supposed resurrection.

For the moment, however, let us examine the life of Apollonius more closely, and reserve until later the vexed question of how reliable is the account given by Philostratus. However, before proceeding, I wish to state that much of what I will be saying here about the events surrounding Apollonius should, strictly speaking, be prefaced with such disclaimers as 'alleged', 'supposed', 'ostensible' and so on, to reinforce the fact that the discussion concerns *claims* rather than well-attested facts. Nevertheless, I trust that the reader will permit me, for the sake of brevity, to omit many of these disclaimers, always bearing in mind that they can and should be inserted mentally where appropriate.

A Note on the Dates of Apollonius

From various references in Philostratus to actual historical events and reigning Emperors, it is frequently possible to locate the approximate or even exact date when many of the incidents in the *Life* are said to have taken place.

⁴ 'Lampridius', *Life of Alexander Severus*, Chapter 29.

⁵ Treatise of Eusebius, Chapter 1.

For example, it is said that Apollonius lived to be a hundred,⁶ and that his exit from this life occurred during the brief reign of the Emperor Nerva (A.D. 96-98). If these two facts are accepted, then it can be deduced that Apollonius was born about 2 B.C., during the principate of Augustus (which lasted from 27 B.C. to A.D. 14).

His place of birth was the city of Tyana, in that part of Asia Minor then known as Cappadocia. What are left of the ruins of Tyana can be found in modern Turkey "at a place now called Kiz Hissar, south-west of Nigdeh, and between this place and Ereklı" (Schmitz, 1873, Vol. 2, p. 1245), about 75 miles north-west of modern Adana (Avery, 1972).

Since my perspective in this paper is primarily a parapsychological one, space does not permit a description of the sage's long career as philosopher-reformer, or of his extensive travels throughout much of the known world, from Spain to India. Details of these aspects of his life can be obtained from a number of modern authors, such as Mead (1980), and of course from the account by Philostratus himself (see Conybeare, 1969, and Jones, 1970, for translations).

THE OSTENSIBLE PSI PHENOMENA OF APOLLONIUS

An unusual feature about Apollonius's birth is perhaps an apt opener for any list of the psi-suggestive incidents surrounding him during his life. During her pregnancy, Apollonius's mother is said to have had the following vision, which I quote from Philostratus:—

When his mother was still carrying him, she had a vision of an Egyptian spirit, Proteus, whom Homer describes changing into different shapes. She was not frightened at all, but asked him who her child would be. He replied: "Me". "Who are you?" she asked, and he said, "Proteus, the Egyptian god". Now if my readers have read the poets there is no point in my describing how wise Proteus was, how clever and various and elusive, and how he seemed to have all knowledge and foreknowledge. [I.4: translation by Jones, 1970, p.30]

Such 'annunciations', the most famous of which was of course that of Gabriel to the Virgin Mary, are not unheard of even today, especially in cases suggestive of reincarnation, though usually expressed in a dream (Stevenson, 1983, p.5).

However, later in the *Life*, when Apollonius is asked to relate his previous incarnation, he says that he was a lowly Egyptian mariner. This seems like a patent inconsistency. A possible clue to the solution of the mystery may reside in the fact that Apollonius says his former personality had a house "on the Island of Pharos, where once upon a time Proteus used to live" (III.24). Perhaps the vision of the god Proteus had been symbolic.

Be that as it may, the best-known incident in the adult life of Apollonius is the one where he supposedly obtained some dramatic information by paranormal means, in the form of a vision of Emperor Domitian as he was being assassinated—an event which took place on 18th September, 96 A.D. This is what occurred, according to Philostratus:—

All this happened in Rome, but was seen by Apollonius in Ephesus. He was holding a discussion in the woods of the park about noon, the very time when the events in

⁶ See Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius*, I.14 and VIII.29.

the palace took place. First he dropped his voice, as if afraid; then his exposition lost some of its usual clarity, as happens when a man is distracted by something in the middle of his argument; then he fell silent, as people do when they have lost the thread. He stared hard at the ground, stepped three or four paces forward, and shouted, "Strike the tyrant! Strike him!" It was not as if he was observing some reflection of truth through a mirror, but as if he was seeing the real thing and seeming to take part in the action.

The Ephesians were all present at the discussion, and were astounded, until Apollonius, after waiting as people do to see the result of an even struggle, said, "Don't worry, my friends. The tyrant was slaughtered today. Why do I say today? Just know, I tell you, just now, about the moment when I fell silent in my talk." Those in Ephesus thought this was madness, and although they wanted him to be right, were afraid of the risks if they listened. "I am not surprised," said Apollonius, "that you do not believe what I say yet, when not even all of Rome knows about it. But look, Rome is finding out now; the rumour is spreading; now ten thousand believe it, now twice as many are leaping in joy, now twice as many as that, now four times as many, now all the cities there. This message will get here too; and you may postpone celebrating with a sacrifice to the time when the news arrives, but I am going to thank the gods for what I have seen."

The story had still not gained credence when messengers came with the good tidings and confirmed Apollonius's wisdom. The assassination of the tyrant, the day on which it had come, the noon hour, the assassins whom Apollonius had urged on, proved to correspond in every detail with what the gods had revealed to him during his discourse. [VIII.26-27: Jones, 1970, pp.241-242]

I would like to discuss this case in some detail from the point of view of an investigating parapsychologist. The two major questions that psychical researchers need to ask are: (1) How do we know that the events at Apollonius's end occurred as reported? and (2) If there was indeed a correlation between the assassination at Rome and the report made by Apollonius to the Ephesians, what are the alternative, non-paranormal explanations for the coinciding of those events?

The first question concerns testimony and documentation. Presumably, Damis was a witness to the events in Ephesus, but his Notebooks have not come down to us. No contemporary historian, such as Tacitus or Suetonius, appears to have recorded the miracle, though they recorded plenty of others. (Indeed, Apollonius is not mentioned at all in the writings of these authors.) However, we are not totally lacking in something like corroborative testimony. A contemporary of Philostratus, Cassius Dio, who was considerably more sceptical about the man of Tyana,⁷ had the following to say in a historical text:—

A certain Apollonius of Tyana on that very day and at that very hour when Domitian was being murdered (as was afterwards accurately determined by events that happened in both places) mounted a lofty rock at Ephesus (or possibly it was somewhere else) and having called together the populace, [stood there speechless for some time, and then cried out] . . . : "Good, Stephanus! Bravo, Stephanus! Smite the bloodthirsty wretch! You have struck, you have wounded, you have slain." This is what actually happened, though one should doubt it ten thousand times over. [Epitome of Book 67, Chapter 18: translation by Cary, 1925, pp.357-359]

⁷ Cassius Dio elsewhere describes him as "a thorough juggler and magician" [Epitome of Book 78, Chapter 18].

If it can be assumed that the events occurred more or less as reported, can we 'explain away' the coincidence as something other than paranormal? Could Apollonius have obtained his information about the assassination by means other than psi? For instance, was the sage somehow in on the conspiracy to kill Domitian, or had he perhaps encouraged the ring-leaders? The facts of the matter tend to argue against this interpretation. Apollonius had not been in Rome for several years. Again, the plot which was in fact successful seems to have been something of a hastily-planned thing, conceived and executed within a matter of days. Moreover, it was carried out not by the aristocracy but by an ex-slave, our man Stephanus. Even had someone sent a message about the plot to Apollonius by the fastest means available in those days, it would have taken some time to reach Ephesus, and in any case there would have been no assurance that that particular plot would succeed. If the facts occurred as reported, the psi hypothesis may perhaps be invoked with some semblance of plausibility.

I shall now describe a number of other incidents suggesting that the sage possessed ESP ability:—

* Apollonius claimed to know "all that men conceal" (I.19). While living in the Temple of Asclepius in Aegae, he was convinced that a rich Cilician making extravagant offerings to the healing god had in fact lost an eye because he had committed some wicked deed. This turned out to be true: his wife had found him in bed with his step-daughter and had put out his eye with a brooch-pin (I.10).

* Again during his stay in Aegae, he was visited by the Governor of Cilicia, who wanted physical favours from young Apollonius rather than medical ones from the god. Apollonius rebuffed him, despite threats from the Governor, and named "a certain day which was the third after that one; on that day public slaves executed the brute on the highway for conspiring against Rome with Archelaus the King of Cappadocia [c. A.D. 17]." (I.12: Jones, 1970, p.37).

* Apollonius claimed to know all languages without learning them. Indeed, he astonished a satrap on the Babylonian frontier by speaking the man's own language (I.21).

* The following incident occurred while Apollonius was in Egypt, conferring with Vespasian just prior to the latter's accession:—

Apollonius blessed his [i.e. Vespasian's] speech, and said, "Capitoline Zeus, you, I know, are the judge of the present circumstances. Keep yourself unchanged for this man's good, and him unchanged for yours, since it is decreed that your temple which the hands of the wicked burned yesterday will be restored by this man."

The emperor was amazed at these words, and Apollonius said, "These things will reveal themselves. Do not ask me anything, but continue in the way you have rightly planned."

Now in Rome at that very time Domitian the son of Vespasian was battling with Vitellius to secure his father's power, and had been held under siege in the Capitol. He escaped his besiegers, but the temple was burned, as Apollonius perceived much sooner than if it had happened in Egypt. [V.30: Jones, 1970, pp.120-121]

A great many such incidents are reported in *The Life of Apollonius*. In Babylon, he correctly predicts that a palace eunuch will be caught having sex with a lady of the harem (I.33, 36). While in Ephesus, he correctly pronounced

that the commotion observed in a flock of birds was due to their making off for some barley spilled in an alley (IV.3). While still in Ephesus, he predicts a plague; the prediction was dismissed at the time, but later came true (IV.4). He also foresaw some particularly devastating earthquakes in Ionia (IV.6). In Athens, having been refused initiation into the Epidaurian Mysteries, Apollonius gave the name of the hierophant who, four years later, succeeded the one who had refused him and who *did* initiate the Man of Tyana (IV.18). He predicted that Nero would begin cutting an Isthmian canal but then stop (IV.24). In Crete, after an earthquake, he announced that "the earth hath borne land and brought it forth". In fact, an island had arisen out of the sea at Cydoniatis, in the firth between Thera and Crete (IV.34). Similarly, when in Rome, he interpreted thunder during an eclipse as meaning that "Something momentous is going to happen and not happen". "Three days later, . . . Nero was at dinner and a thunderbolt hit the table, breaking a cup when it was in his hands and not far from his lips." (IV.43: Jones, 1970, p.105). And while travelling from Sicily to Greece, he had a presentiment of misfortune, and changed vessels; the Syracusan ship shortly afterwards sank (V.18). This by no means exhausts the incidents suggestive of ESP.

Perhaps also to be classified among the mental abilities of Apollonius is the séance that he is supposed to have had with the ghost of Achilles (IV.11-16).

I shall now move on to the paranormal physical and physiological phenomena supposedly produced by Apollonius. These are much fewer in number than the mental phenomena:—

* During Apollonius's first visit to Rome, in A.D. 66, he was brought up on a charge of treason before the prefect of the pretorian guard, Ofonius Tigellinus.

An accuser was primed against Apollonius, a man who had already caused the deaths of many and had a string of such triumphs. This man had a paper in his hands with the charge written on it, and he waved it at Apollonius like a sword, saying that it had been sharpened and would finish him off. But when Tigellinus unrolled the paper, he found no trace of writing on it, but instead saw a blank sheet. This made him suspect something supernatural . . . [IV.44: Jones, 1970, p.106]

* Nearly thirty years later saw him back in Rome, and again in prison. Apollonius somehow managed to free his leg from its chains, and then inserted it back again (VII.38).

* One should perhaps include under this heading a small number of medical miracles that Apollonius is said to have carried out, such as the curing of a mad dog and its victim (VI.43).

* While in Athens, Apollonius is said to have exorcized a young man possessed by a demon (IV.20).

* Apollonius is often described as having raised people from the dead. However, I know of only one case of this in Philostratus, and even that is ambiguous. This is what the Athenian has to say:—

Apollonius performed another miracle. There was a girl who appeared to have died just at the time of her wedding. The groom followed the bier, with all the lamentations of an unconsummated marriage, and the city of Rome mourned with him, since the girl was from a family of consular rank. Apollonius appeared on the scene and said, "Put the bier down. I will stop you crying for the girl." Immediately he asked her name, which made most people think he was going to declaim a speech

of the kind delivered at funerals to raise lamentation. But Apollonius merely touched her and said something secretly over her, waking the girl up from her apparent death. Immediately the girl spoke, and went back to her father's house like Alcestis brought back to life by Hercules. Her kinsmen gave Apollonius a hundred and fifty thousand drachmas, but he said he was giving it as an extra dowry for the girl. He may have seen a spark of life in her which her doctors had not noticed, since apparently it was drizzling and steam was coming from her face; or he may have revived and restored her life when it was extinguished; but the true explanation of this has proved unfathomable, to me no less than to the bystanders. [IV.45: Jones, 1970, p.107]

* On two occasions, Apollonius is said to have miraculously transported himself bodily from one geographical location to another. The first time, the sage was in Smyrna. A plague was gripping Ephesus, and a deputation was sent to Apollonius, asking him to become "the physician of their suffering". Says Philostratus, "He decided to make the journey without delay, and after merely saying, "Let us go", he was in Ephesus" (IV.10: Jones, 1970, p.92).

The distance between Smyrna and Ephesus is approximately 40 miles.

The second case is actually much more elaborate and has woven into it elements of extrasensory perception as well. This episode should perhaps be ranked second in importance behind the assassination vision. There are also some striking parallels with passages in the Gospels. The incident probably occurred in the early 90s A.D. Apollonius was in Smyrna, and had been criticizing Emperor Domitian rather too freely. The emperor heard of this, and sent a warrant for his arrest and extradition to Rome. Apollonius is reported to have precognized all this and set out for Rome even before the letter of arrest had arrived (VII.9-10). Indeed his fellow-philosopher Demetrius warns him that such precognitions will make it all the harder for Apollonius to defend himself against the charge of black magic (VII.12). Later on, closer to the time of the trial, Apollonius summoned Damis and said:—

... "My defence will occur on the appointed day, but you must take the road to Dicaearchia,⁸ because it is better to go by land, and if you talk to Demetrius, walk by the sea where the isle of Calypso is, because I will appear before your eyes there."

"Alive," asked Damis, "or how?"

Apollonius laughed and said, "To my way of thinking, alive, but to yours, risen from the dead."

Damis says he left unwillingly, neither dreading that Apollonius would die nor confident that he would not. In two days he reached Dicaearchia, and heard about the storm that had occurred at that time. A rainstorm had broken over the sea, and sunk some ships that were sailing to the city and driven others to Sicily and the Straits. Then Damis understood why Apollonius had told him to travel by land. [VII.41: Jones, 1970, p.197]

Let us now move to the scene in the court-room:—

... the emperor ... said, "I acquit you of the charges, but you must remain until we have conversed privately."

Apollonius, however, gathered his courage and said, "Thank you, emperor, but because of these god-forsaken men [i.e. the informers] the cities are ruined, the islands are full of fugitives, the mainland of groaning, the armies of cowardice, and the senate of suspicion. Allow me, too, leave to speak, if that be your wish; if not, send someone to take hold of my body, because to take hold of my soul is impossible.

⁸ Dicaearchia was the Greek name for the port of Puteoli (modern Pozzuoli), which is some 100 miles from Rome.

In fact, you can never even take hold of my body; you will not kill me, since I am not mortal."⁹

With these words he vanished from the court-house, and took advantage of the present opportunity because the tyrant was evidently planning to question him on a variety of subjects rather than in good faith, no doubt being proud of the fact that he had not put him to death; and Apollonius was anxious not to be led into such an examination. He thought that the best way to ensure this was not to conceal his nature but to make clear that he was able never to be caught if he did not want it. [VIII.4-5: Jones, 1970, p.205]

Apollonius left the court by some supernatural, inexplicable means. The emperor did not react in the way he was generally expected to. Everyone thought he would roar with indignation, start a hunt for Apollonius, and make an announcement through all of his empire that no one was to admit the philosopher. He did none of this, as if he were deliberately controverting the general opinion, or had realized at last that he had no power against Apollonius. Whether he thought Apollonius beneath his notice may be judged from the sequel, in which he felt confusion rather than contempt.

He began to listen to another case after that one, which involved a city disputing a will with an individual, I think. The emperor forgot not only the names of the parties but even the point of the dispute, because his questions were pointless and his answers were not even relevant to the hearing. This clearly proved that the tyrant was dazed and lost, for the very reason that he had been convinced by his flatterers that he could not forget anything.

This was the state Apollonius put the tyrant into, and proved that to someone of his own wisdom the man before whom all Greeks and barbarians trembled was child's play. Apollonius left the court before noon, and about evening was seen by Demetrius and Damis in Dicaearchia. This was the reason why he had urged Damis not to wait for his defence but to go by land to Dicaearchia: he did not reveal his plans, but told his closest friend to do something that proved to be in accordance with them.

Damis had arrived the day before, and had conversed with Demetrius about the events leading up to the hearing. The information put Demetrius into a more timid frame of mind than was to be expected when Apollonius was the subject, and the next day he began to question Damis on the same issue, loitering with him beside the sea: it is here that the tales about Calypso are set. They had despaired of his ever coming back since there was a universal dread of the tyrant's power, but still they obeyed Apollonius's orders because of his endowments. In dejection, they had gone to sit in the grotto of the Nymphs in which the jar stands: this is a jar of white stone containing a spring of water, which neither flows over the edge nor goes down if it is drawn from. They were discussing the explanation of the water, without very much interest because of their despondency over Apollonius, and were returning to the subject of the events preceding the hearing.

Damis groaned out loud, and said something like, "Gods above, will we never see our good, noble comrade?"

Apollonius, who was now standing at the entrance to the grotto, heard this and said, "You will, in fact you already have."

"Alive?" asked Demetrius. "But if dead, we have never stopped weeping for you."

Apollonius stretched out his hand, and said, "Take hold of me. If I elude you, I am a ghost come back from Persephone's domain, like the ghosts which the gods below reveal to men when mourning makes them too despondent. But if I stay when you grasp me, persuade Damis too that I am alive and have not lost my body."

⁹ *Iliad*, XXII.13.

Unable to disbelieve any longer, they stood up, hugged Apollonius, welcomed him and asked him about his defence. Demetrius thought that he had not even made one, because he would have been put to death despite his innocence, while Damis thought he had made one, but perhaps rather earlier, not that very day.

"I have made my defence," said Apollonius, "and I have won my case. The defence took place today, not long ago: it was getting on for midday."

"How have you come such a distance in so small a part of the day?" asked Demetrius. "You may imagine what you like, except that I used a ram or wings made of feathers. Consider a god responsible for my return." [VIII.8-12: Jones, 1970, pp. 231-233]

Other Anomalies

All the incidents described above are recognizable as resembling the types of psi familiar to modern parapsychologists. There exists a class of claims, however, that by our standards can only be described as bizarre or unparalleled. For example, after embarking upon his house-call by miraculous means, Apollonius's (successful) treatment for the plague in Ephesus was to order the stoning of what appeared to be an old beggar. When the pile of stones was removed, the people saw not an old man but "a dog resembling a Molossian hound but the size of the largest lion, crushed by the stones and spewing foam like a dog with rabies" (IV.10: Jones, 1970, p.93). There are a number of anomalous incidents of this kind, outside the sphere of the modern paranormal, which probably have the effect on most readers of reducing the credibility of the overall biography.

The Last Days of Apollonius

I have purposely been vague when referring to the 'death' of Apollonius. This is because it is claimed by Philostratus that the Man of Tyana may have died in no ordinary way, but rather was assumed bodily into heaven, in Crete, in a shrine to Artemis (VIII.30).

Nine months after his passing, Apollonius is reported to have appeared to a young man, who was sceptical concerning immortality, in a vision that began in sleep but continued into waking consciousness. Philostratus seemed to accept this as proof of *post-mortem* survival, but by today's standards the evidence lacks cogency and invites alternative normal explanations.

THE RELIABILITY OF THE 'LIFE OF APOLLONIUS'

In the course of reading about Apollonius one comes across nearly every possible evaluation, from positive to negative, of the degree of historical truth contained in Philostratus's narrative. At the one extreme is the position that the *Life* is no more than an entertaining historical novel. E. R. Dodds dismisses the *Life* as a hagiographical romance (Dodds, 1971, p.203). At the other end of the spectrum are those like G. R. S. Mead (1980) and Rohmer (1970) who accept virtually everything in the story.

One's judgement in the matter seems to be influenced in part by (a) whether one allows the possibility of the paranormal, and (b) whether one is Christian. Some reject the story because the miracles make it too fantastic for credence. Others reject it because to accept it might throw doubt on the exclusiveness of

miracles as occurring only in the Christian domain. (It seems significant that Eusebius neglects to mention and explain away several of the most striking Apollonian miracles, and, without apparent justification, frequently invokes a *diabolus ex machina* simply because the claimed facts are miraculous.) A third viewpoint can be identified, namely the 'strict evidentialist' one, its most obvious proponent being Dodds: though open to the possibility of paranormal phenomena, Dodds seems to have come to the negative conclusion he did because, in part, he thought Philostratus was too keen to canonize Apollonius before properly investigating the evidence for the miracles.

Many people thus think that much of the *Life* is pure fiction. Some even think that Apollonius's companion Damis (along with his Notebooks) is just a literary invention, like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. (See Bowersock, 1970, for a discussion of the existence of Damis.) Others point to several historical inaccuracies in the text, and argue that Philostratus's profession as a rhetorician seems to be reflected in long, sometimes tedious, but carefully-constructed speeches on themes not out of place in schools of oratory. No doubt, too, there were plenty of books available to provide the Athenian with material for local colour and geography. Finally, we must not forget that, apart from one unflattering reference in a second-century satirist,¹⁰ we have no record of Apollonius prior to Philostratus, who was writing more than a century after the death of his subject. The quality of testimony usually deteriorates the further away in time it is from the facts attested.

From the positive angle, if one can overcome the obstacle of seeing the miracles as conclusively indicative of mere story-telling, then it seems not unreasonable to view the *Life* as containing at least a kernel of truth. Certainly Philostratus has made embellishments and additions and even some errors. But then the Evangelists did not report Christ's words verbatim, and they had their own philosophical interpretations of his life and significance. Again, it is impressive that Philostratus's description of the Punjabi city of Taxila, which Apollonius and Damis are described as having visited, has been shown by excavation to be strikingly accurate (Marshall, 1960) – a positive point rarely mentioned by the sceptic. It might be retorted that the accuracy of the description suggests only that Philostratus must have had access to a travelogue or geographical text about Taxila, or (conceivably) that he had visited the city personally. This is entirely possible, but the facts are also undeniably consistent with the alternative explanation that Damis's Notebooks were real and were being used as a source by Philostratus. Such is the almost irresolvable nature of the debate.

Yet if the *normal* events in the work are in dispute, then so much more so are the incidents alleged to be *paranormal*! It is not possible now, some 2000 years later, to establish the authenticity or evidentiality of the parapsychological claims. The evidence falls far short of what is required by today's standards of authentication. If the case for the paranormal rested solely upon Apollonius, it would be slight indeed. Thus, nothing which I have recounted should be construed as conclusive evidence for psi. Rather, it is a historical (or even legendary) description of *claims* of psychic events. Such *thaumatography* – as

¹⁰ Lucian, *Alexander, or the Pseudo-Prophet*, Chapter 6.

a poor man's thaumatology—serves at least to inform parapsychologists of the existence of reports of these phenomena in far-distant times, and moreover alerts us to possible parallels between ancient and modern claims regarding psi. Whether such similarities as may emerge between reports then and now denote common features of genuine psychic functioning, or merely recurrent themes in parapsychological mythopoeia, probably cannot be determined at this stage.

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